

Bakersfield

by girlthehellup

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Summary: The first eighteen years of her life are something that Camille wishes she could leave behind.
Oneshot.

Bakersfield

When she's just four, they move out of the house.

Looking back, of course, she realizes that it wasn't much better than the little trailer they end up in - it was just a shabby apartment building. Still, it had two whole rooms, big, proper-sized rooms. The trailer is small and cramped and hot. In hundred degree summers, it's unbearable.

Theo cries every night for a week, and Camille tries her hardest not to do the same. When her parents think the two kids are asleep, they grumble about money, jobs, and adult stuff she can't quite understand.

After a few weeks, the grumbling turns to arguing, and either one bothers to wait until the children are too far away to hear.

Camille longs for the day when she's finally old enough for school. Theo gets to leave every day, off with his friends somewhere much less boring than a trailer. She's stuck in the mind-numbing heat, playing outside the trailer (because anything is better than listening to her parents fight).

She's seven when she's finally allowed to wander further than the trailer park.

She's tried before, of course, but every attempt at escape is met with angry yells. You'll get hit by a car, you'll get kidnapped, we can't afford you getting into trouble. It's always some similar excuse. Theo's already enough of an issue at school and she hates

that it means she is stuck in the same place every day.

Eventually she wears them down with enough pleas and tears (she's only just learning how powerful crocodile tears are). She's given a few harsh warnings about how they can't help her out of trouble if she's far away from home, and then they let her free.

The first few moments as her feet hit the pavement outside the trailer park are the most beautiful of her life. It's still impossibly hot, the sun glaring in her eyes, but she's far away from everything. This is better than school, she thinks, because here there's not a single person to point and laugh at her. All that stretches in front of her is grass, a road, and a few houses scattered here and there.

Her first few ventures out into unknown territory lead her to a little sections of shops, several empty fields, and a fairground. The shops aren't any fun after the first time she sees them; her parents' warnings ring in her ears as she stares at little candies and soaps in the window of one shop. With no money (and not enough courage to take things) this place is pointless.

The fields are quiet and peaceful, so she goes there whenever the yelling in the tiny trailer gets to be too much. Theo follows her a few times but decides that seemingly endless stretches of grass are too boring for him. She pleads with him to let her join him and his friends, but he always says no.

The fairgrounds are the best. She sneaks in between horse trailers, too little for anyone to really see and too fast for anyone to stop her. There she stands, dirty hands pressed up against metal fences, and makes faces at the animals. The horses are nice enough, all soft fur and disgruntled noises. It's not always the most entertaining place to be, but it's better than home.

She's nine when she finally starts learning the skill of persuasion.

She's seen it enough with Theo; a few tears, some sad story, and he can get money off strangers like magic. In school his tactics can sometimes be a little more brutal, with threats lining his pockets. Unfortunately for him, a lot of the kids he threatens end up telling on him.

She's much smarter than him and she has a far greater advantage. At this age she's still got huge eyes and a round, chubby face, nothing but the picture of innocence. Camille cons the entire town for everything they're worth, crying and declaring, "I'm just so hungry", but mom and dad can't afford to feed the family anymore," or some other nonsense to elicit sympathy. It's impossibly easy to get money from strangers.

When Theo realizes just how good she is, he has her help. She bursts into tears in each shop they visit, and he pockets whatever he can get his hands on while the attention is on Camille. It's one of the few times she feels close to him.

She's thirteen when everyone starts drinking.

It wasn't uncommon for her parents to have a drink or two, but as her

father loses his job and her mother takes on extra shifts, they turn to alcohol for answers. Theo steals beers when they're not looking (and at this point Camille thinks they probably wouldn't care even if she took a few).

They also leave for longer and longer periods of time. Their mom works most days and when she's not doing that she stays over at friends' houses. As for their father, he takes his drinking out to bars and parties, crashing in the houses of college kids half his age.

It leaves Theo and Camille all alone the trailer, sometimes for days.

One night it's hellishly hot, so she's curled up in bed in nothing but underwear, too skinny and young to worry about bras yet (and because Theo always has to exaggerate, the night lives on in infamy as the night she ran naked through a trailer park when really it's not true at all). It takes forever to sleep because Theo's off on the opposite side of the trailer, playing music on their old radio, singing along off-key. She hears the clink of glass bottles and resolutely ignores the increasingly drunk singing, the heat lulling her to sleep.

She wakes up to a surprised shout and bright, searing flames.

The tiny kitchen is on fire and Theo's frantically trying to quell the flames by slapping them with a dishcloth. The entire place smells like burnt meat and beer. Camille doesn't even have to think because in the blink of an eye she's on her feet and sprinting through the trailer park at top speed. The dirt beneath her feet is still warm after the sun's been down for hours. All she can smell is smoke.

Theo stumbles out behind her, dazed, and sits down twenty feet away as the trailer burns. Amid the smoke and the surprised cries of the neighbors, he just sits there and laughs while she stands in the dark, biting back tears.

She's fifteen when she discovers a distraction better than con games.

It's an accident, really. After school she hangs out with the older kids at a nearby park, watching them smoke and offering up a witty comment every now and then. She's sat next to one of the guys, head tilted up towards the sun, when lips press gently against hers. It's a shock at first (and she slaps him on the arm for it, berating him the whole time) but a few more experimental kisses and she's hooked.

Logically she knows it's just biology at work. It's a cocktail of hormones, mainly from puberty, and it makes kissing amazing. Sex is even better, she discovers, and so she fills her life with it.

At this point both her parents and Theo are all caught up in their own lives. She brings a few boys home with her and whenever he's there he plays the part of big brother. She hates him for it, and hates how he only seems to pay attention to her when he can get amusement or money from her. He has no place to judge her when he's gone much further off the rails than she has.

And so the kissing continues, and she goes through boys without much thought for keeping the same ones around.

One night she's sat on the steps out front with a girl from school, both of them reluctant to go inside or go home. There's something about the way the light hits her friend's face that tempts Camille forward, and suddenly they're kissing. She's never even thought to kiss any girls but it's as good as kissing boys, if not better. Her friend kisses her in a way that's so restrained, gentle but ready to surge forward in earnest at any moment. Camille loses all track of her thoughts as her fingers slide through soft, brown curls.

The door of the trailer creaks and it's over as soon as it started. She's yanked away by her father and hauled inside roughly while Theo laughs and throws insults in the background.

That's unnatural, don't do that! both parents scream (they would both be home, this night of all nights) and Camille flinches at every word. She hates the way Theo laughs, she hates the way her mother and father both reek of beer, and she hates how they tear apart something that had made her feel good.

She's sixteen a week later, and a week later her parents are gone.

She can't figure out whose fault it was and doesn't particularly want to know. She's not the only one who'd caused trouble - Theo's in over his head for something, with strange men knocking at their door every other day. Maybe it's drugs, or gambling. Maybe it's both. She chooses not to ask.

In a sad way, it's not much different without their parents gone. Other than the lack of an already very low income, life feels the same. On weekends Camille works at an auto garage, while Theo tries wheedling and bargaining his way into getting money.

Supporting herself and Theo while attending school feels impossible. She's always taken easily to math, science, and computers, but there's no energy left. It feels as if she's trapped forever in the unbearable heat and dreariness of the trailer park. It feels like she's stuck in a no-win situation.

Theo causes problem after problem, bring the worst sorts of people to their door. She learns to hit hard and run fast, because the alternative is much more grim than a few bruised knuckles. No amount of tears, pleas, or begging get him to stop.

She's eighteen when it finally ends.

It takes the last two years of high school, but she powers through every class, the SATs, and college applications in between work and looking after Theo. The early hours of the morning are spent writing essays for scholarships, each one written like her life depends on them (and in some way, she thinks, it does).

The good news stuns her. She's smart, and she's worked hard, but she doesn't expect any acceptance letters or scholarships until the envelopes are in her hands. She stashes them under her mattress, hoarding them like treasure. Theo had never bothered with college and

that makes it feel like something that's for her and her alone.

The afternoon she leaves is hot and muggy. The sun's beating against the metal walls, roasting everything inside. Camille gathers up what she has in a duffel bag as quietly as possible while Theo sleeps.

She can't decide if leaving him like this is cruel, without a note or a single goodbye. She's spent nearly three years trying to save him from himself and nothing has worked, so this time Camille thinks maybe it's time to save herself.

With everything packed, she swings the duffel bag over one shoulder and leaves in complete silence. There's a bus that will take her to a train, and from there she's headed to college hundreds of miles away. Each step is heavier than anything she's done, but despite the guilt she knows it's a change for the good. Moments pass, and she's out of the trailer park and headed down the road to the bus stop.

She never looks back.

End
file.